

Comparative Predictions of International Orientations across Australian and New Zealand University Students

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Abstract

Student exchange programs have been identified as effective means through which university students may develop international competencies which are much sought after by employers. The present study explored the multicultural effectiveness of Australian and New Zealand university students, specifically in their orientation towards international activities, and their desire to participate in international education exchange programs. Exchange students report higher open-mindedness towards different cultures and greater levels of flexibility than non-exchange students. Students who report higher levels of cultural empathy and open-mindedness are more likely to be exchange students. Furthermore, exchange students who report higher levels of open-mindedness are more likely to report aspirations towards an international career. Further studies should examine the constructs and predictive power of the MPQ in relation to success with international sojourn.

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that globalization and technological innovation are changing the structure of the global marketplace (Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills, 1995)¹. Organizations are seeking employees who possess the skills and characteristics that would allow the company to be more competitive in the international arena. Subsequently, contemporary universities are charged with the duty to prepare students to work in the new international context, thus meeting the needs of business and society (Australian International Education Foundation, 1998; Fantini,

¹ Also known as the Karpin (1995) report

Arias-Galicia, & Guay, 2001; Higher Education Council, 1990; Webb, Mayer, Pioche, & Allen, 1999). Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, several authors (see Fantini et al., 2001 for a review) have identified that universities are failing to meet the needs of students and in turn, employers, as many higher education graduates are unprepared to work in the global context (Wilson, 1989). Through their study examining the opinions of multinational employers in relation to internationalization and business education, Webb and her colleagues (1999) discovered that employers believe that an international experience would provide graduates with international business knowledge and skills, and intercultural competencies.

It is argued that one of the most effective means for graduates to develop international skills and communication competencies is through international academic mobility programs such as study abroad and student exchange (Clyne & Rizvi, 1998; Fantini et al., 2001; Gochenour, 1993; Lawson, 1969; Wallace, 1993). Since the early 1990's, Australian and New Zealand universities have placed a greater emphasis on internationalization by developing internationalization policies, which influence the content of degree programs and external study opportunities (Gatfield, 1997). Program initiatives include international curricula, attracting international students to on-campus courses, student exchange opportunities and, developing international research teams (Nesdale & Todd, 1997).

Fewer than one percent of Australian and New Zealand study abroad as part of their degree (Daly, 2002), and Fitzgerald (1997) highlights that only thirteen percent of Australian school students study a foreign language, with this proportion decreasing significantly at the tertiary level. In their study examining the factors influencing the decision of Australian students to participate in a student exchange program, Clyne and Rizvi (1998) found that students choose to undertake this sojourn because of a desire to travel, meet new people and experience other cultures. Respondents also identified that they wished to develop international skills such as language skills, intercultural competencies and global awareness. Moreover, students felt that participating in a student

exchange would increase their marketability in the Australian workforce, giving them an advantage compared to their peers upon graduating.

Studies in the U.S, Australia and New Zealand have revealed that cost is the major reason for non-participation in exchange programs (Chieffo, 2000; Clyne & Rizvi, 1998). Other negative factors identified by both participants and non-participants include concerns about how to adjust to a new institution and new country, communication and language barriers, travelling alone and personal safety, making friends, and failing the subjects (Clyne & Rizvi, 1998).

A review of the literature highlights that most studies examining the effects of international sojourn tend to focus on participants from the U.S and Europe. There is a paucity of research in this field from the Australia-Pacific region. Therefore, this paper will add to this body of knowledge through incorporating the perspectives of Australian and New Zealand students who choose to participate in academic mobility programs. In particular, the present study explores the multicultural effectiveness of university students from these two countries, specifically in their orientation towards international travel and work, and their desire to participate in international education exchange programs. Comparisons are made between students who participate in the university exchange programs with those who remain at the home institutions.

Methodology

Participants

This study involved two samples of students from 13 Australian and six New Zealand universities.

Exchange Students

Surveys were sent to 600 Australian and 150 New Zealand students who were participating in the exchange program and who were departing in the following three

months. Twenty percent (N = 122) of Australian students and 35% (N = 53) of New Zealand students returned the questionnaire. The majority of participants reported Australian or New Zealand nationality, with nine respondents indicating that they were born in other English speaking countries (e.g. Canada, United Kingdom) and 27 students were from non-English speaking countries. The mean length of time since the overseas-born students immigrated to Australia or New Zealand was 12 years (SD = 6.91). Half of all respondents spoke only one language, with 29% of students (N = 49) reporting that they were bilingual and, 34 students indicating that they spoke three or more languages.

Seventy-five percent of respondents (N = 128) were female; one quarter of respondents were male (N = 43). The age of these students varied between 18 and 51 years (M = 21.66, SD = 4.05). Over two thirds of students (N = 122) were employed on a part-time basis. Sixty-six percent of participants (N = 112) lived at home. The median reported household income was \$40,000 - \$60,000. However it is interesting to note that the distribution was bimodal with 35% of respondents (N=57) indicating that their gross household income was less than \$20,000 and the household income of 43 participants was more than \$80,000. As expected, residence was significantly correlated with income ($p < 0.01$) with those students who did not live at home being more likely to have an income of less than \$20,000.

Almost one third of these students were enrolled in dual degrees, with arts/commerce being the most popular combination. One quarter of students (N = 43) reported studying in the arts faculty, with 29 students enrolled in commerce/ law degrees. Other areas of study included the science and health field (13.5%), engineering and technology (9.9%), fine arts and music (2.3%) and education (1.2%). One exchange student was completing a research higher degree.

Non-exchange students

To compare the characteristics of exchange students with non-exchange students, 200 Australian students were asked to complete a similar questionnaire. A response rate of 18.5% (N = 37) was achieved. This control group was proportionally matched for age and

gender through using a purposive sampling technique. To ensure that the control group also proportionally matches the exchange students for country of origin, New Zealand students will be surveyed later this year. The majority of the non-exchange student cohort was Australian (N = 31) and 86.5% spoke only one language. One British student and five students from non-English speaking countries completed the questionnaire. The mean length of time these participants had been in Australia was 10.4 years (SD = 11.15).

Thirty non-exchange students were female and seven were male. The average age of the non-exchange student group was 20, with the youngest respondent being 18 and the oldest 39 years of age. Over three-quarters of these participants were engaged in part-time employment, and all reported that they still lived at home. There was equal distribution across the income brackets. Eight participants stated that their annual household income was below \$20 000; six respondents' annual household income was between \$20,000-\$40,000; eight earned between \$40,000- \$60,000, five between \$60,000 and \$80,000; and, seven participants reported that their household income was above \$80,000 per year. Most of these non-exchange students (N = 32) were enrolled in commerce and law courses. Other areas of study undertaken by this cohort include engineering/ technology (N = 2) and, arts/ humanities (N = 1). Two respondents were combining dual degrees in the fields of commerce/ law and arts/ humanities.

Questionnaire

Two questionnaires were administered; one to the exchange students prior to departing Australia or New Zealand, and the other to the control group of non-exchange students. In addition to biographical questions and the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) (van Oudenhoven & van der Zee, 2002), both questionnaires included measures of co-ethnic and cross-ethnic interactions and friendships. The final section of the survey completed by exchange students included questions about their international orientation and motivation for participating in the exchange program.

The MPQ is comprised of 91 items that describe 'concrete behaviours or tendencies' (van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002, p684) across five dimensions: Cultural Empathy,

Open-mindedness, Social Initiative, Flexibility and, Emotional Stability. The scale for Cultural Empathy measures an individual's ability to empathize with people from different cultural backgrounds. The scale contains 18 items such as "understands other people's feelings". Cronbach's α was 0.87. The second dimension is Open-mindedness (18 items), which measures the openness of the respondent's attitude towards different cultures, for example: "Is fascinated by other people's opinions". It had a Cronbach α of 0.83. A high score on the Social Initiative dimension indicates a tendency to take an active approach in social situations, for example: "makes contacts easily". This scale contains 17 items and had an α of 0.86. The Flexibility measure refers to an ability to adjust one's behaviour in foreign situations and cultures. An example of an item in this scale is "changes easily from one activity to another". Cronbach's alpha in the current study was 0.79. The final scale of Emotional Stability (Cronbach α of 0.83) measures an individual's tendency to remain calm when in stressful situations, for example: "takes it for granted that things will turn out right".

A four-item indicator of social co-ethnic and cross-ethnic interactions was used. The questions related to the number of close friends from the respondent's same cultural group and other cultural groups, and the amount of time in the last week spent with friends from the same cultural group and other cultural groups.

Finally, the exchange students were asked questions regarding their international orientation and the extent to which various factors influenced their decision to engage in the exchange program. Examples of items include 'I intend to work overseas in the future' and, the exchange program is 'part of my travel plans'.

Results

As detailed in Table 1, scale means and intercorrelations were computed for the MPQ scores for the total group of exchange and non-exchange students. As van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee (2002) found all scale means were above the midpoint and in particular the means for cultural empathy and open-mindedness were quite high. Indeed, van

Oudenhoven and Van der Zee (2002, p686) point out that such results indicate “a possible susceptibility of the two scales to social desirability bias”.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and scale intercorrelations for the MPQ scales

		M	SD	2	3	4	5
1	Cultural empathy	3.82	.41	.57*	.35*	.06	.21*
2	Open-mindedness	3.72	.49		.59*	.24*	.42*
3	Social initiative	3.58	.55			.40*	.34*
4	Emotional stability	3.14	.42				.39*
5	Flexibility	3.38	.44				

*p<0.01.

The scales were not independent. As seen above, the highest correlations between the scales were found between cultural empathy and open-mindedness and, open-mindedness and social initiative.

Of particular interest in this study was the difference between the exchange and non-exchange students on the MPQ scales. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for the MPQ score for each group. A series of independent sample t-tests showed that there were significant differences between the exchange and non-exchange students on the dimensions of Open-mindedness, $t(209) = 2.8$, $p < .01$ and Flexibility, $t(210) = 2.16$, $p < .05$. Levene’s test for inequality of variance was applied because of the difference in group size but no significant difference was found. Exchange students reported higher open-mindedness about other cultures and greater flexibility, while means on the other scales were similar for both student groups.

Table 2. MPQ results for Exchange (N=175) and Non-exchange students (N=37)

	Exchange students		Non-exchange students	
	M	SD	M	SD
Cultural empathy	3.81	0.40	3.86	0.46
Open-mindedness	3.77	0.48	3.52	0.50
Social initiative	3.59	0.55	3.57	0.53
Emotional stability	3.16	0.43	3.06	0.38
Flexibility	3.41	0.44	3.24	0.42

It was hypothesised that the MPQ would predict whether a student would be an exchange student. Regression analyses show that the MPQ subscales explained 9.4% of the variance in student grouping, $F(5, 205) = 4.24$, $p < .01$. Closer inspection of the individual scales showed that students who reported higher levels of cultural empathy ($t=2.41$) and social initiative ($t=2.14$) are more likely to be exchange students.

The MPQ scales did explain 8% of the variance in the number of cross-ethnic friendships, $F(5, 167) = 2.95, p < 0.05$. Specifically, students who reported higher levels of open-mindedness ($t=2.4$) had a greater number of friends from different ethnic groups. An independent t-test showed that there were significant differences between the exchange students and the non-exchange students in relation to the number of reported close friends with others from a different ethnic background, $p < 0.05$. Additionally the results on the MPQ scales are effective in predicting the amount of time students spend with friends from other ethnic groups, $F(5, 202) = 2.67, p < 0.05$.

Finally, we were interested in the predictive value of the MPQ and orientation towards international activities for exchange students. The MPQ scales explained eight percent of the variance in exchange students' travel plans, $F(5, 167) = 3.02, p < .05$. Students with higher open-mindedness ($t=2.13$) and social initiative ($t=2.87$) scores were more likely to desire overseas travel. Similarly those students who reported higher open-mindedness scores ($t=2.85$) had greater intention to work overseas. The MPQ scales explained seven percent of the variance in intention to work overseas, $F(5, 167) = 2.32, p < .05$. Exchange students who reported higher levels of open-mindedness ($t=1.78$) and flexibility ($t=1.90$) were more likely to desire living overseas.

Discussion

This study provides support for the applicability of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire in the Australian and New Zealand cultures. All five of the MPQ's subscales yielded high reliabilities, comparable with those reported for van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee's (2002) native English speaking sample.

The findings reveal that there were significant differences between exchange and non-exchange students on the MPQ dimensions of open-mindedness and flexibility. Exchange students report higher levels of open-mindedness towards different cultures and greater levels of flexibility than non-exchange students. Several authors (Arthur & Bennett, 1995; Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991; Kealey, 1990) argue that these two dimensions

are necessary for expatriate success. Indeed, expatriates themselves have rated factors such as flexibility, cultural sensitivity and open-mindedness as highly important for a successful sojourn. Members of this self-selecting group appear to present these characteristics prior to departure, which will aid their in-country adjustment and promote a satisfactory experience.

The results also show that the MPQ subscales can be used to predict whether a student is an exchange student or non-exchange student. Specifically, those students who report higher levels of cultural empathy and social initiative are more likely to be exchange students. If a student were to participate in an exchange program, they would need to be able to empathize with the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of people from the host culture. Without these skills, the student's psychosocial adjustment would be lower and thus the student would be less satisfied with the exchange experience (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Searle and Ward (1990) argue that social support is a major predictor in psychological adjustment. Moreover, when moving into a new culture the sojourner needs to be able to approach the social situations in an active way and to take initiative for this interaction. So the exchange students who reported higher levels of social initiative in this study appear to be more prepared for coping in their new social setting.

However despite these personal characteristics acting as predictors, perhaps there are external factors that are playing a stronger influence in the decision to engage in an international sojourn. External factors include the discipline in which students are enrolled, linguistic ability, personal income and costs of the sojourn; both living and social costs. In a study by Daly, Barker, Jones and Troth (in preparation), non-exchange students reported that the cost of travel and living costs in the other countries greatly influenced their decision not to participate in the exchange program. Moreover social cost, including personal safety proved to be a mild deterrent for non-exchange students, and also mildly influenced an exchange student's choice of destination. Given the changing political positions in the world, perhaps social cost is becoming a stronger influence. This area should be investigated further.

Students who report higher levels of open-mindedness are more likely to have greater numbers of friends from different ethnic groups. However, it is difficult to determine whether the levels of these students' open-mindedness have been increased through their cross-cultural friendships, or these students previously possessed higher levels of open-mindedness compared to the general population, and in turn sought out such friendships. Additionally, exchange students in general reported that they have more friends from different ethnic groups than non-exchange students. This suggests that prior to participating in an exchange program these students already have a desire to interact with people from other cultures. Indeed, the exchange students reported higher levels of cultural empathy and social initiative suggesting that they have a greater understanding of other cultures and are willing to take an active role in interacting with others; both in co-ethnic and cross-ethnic interactions.

The MPQ appears to be effective with Australian and New Zealand university students in predicting cross-cultural activities and inspiration for an international career. Exchange students who reported greater levels of open-mindedness, social initiative and flexibility are more likely to report aspirations towards an international future. It is argued that students undertake a sojourn because of a desire to travel, meet new people and experience other cultures (Clyne &, Rizvi, 1998). These characteristics are expressed through the MPQ scales of open-mindedness, flexibility and social initiative. Similarly, Van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2000) found that flexibility and social initiative are most predictive of the extent to which students engage in cross-cultural activities and their international orientation.

In the current study exchange students did report high levels of social initiative and that predicted their cross-cultural activities in relation to interacting with others from different cultures when living in their home culture. Participating in an exchange program indicates a desire to engage in cross-cultural activities, and thus a higher level of social initiative means that a student is more likely to undertake an educational sojourn. Moreover, a greater level of open-mindedness is related to a student's desire to travel overseas and live and/or work in another country. To desire such activities requires an

interest in other cultures, an unprejudiced attitude to other cultural norms and values, an ability to adopt an active approach in social situations, and the flexibility to adjust to new cultural norms and values.

There is a strong need for additional research of the factors that influence a student's decision to engage in an international education exchange to be conducted. Moreover, an in-depth consideration of personality and other characteristics such as linguistic knowledge, academic ability and socioeconomic status is warranted. It is anticipated that further studies will examine the constructs and predictive power of the MPQ in relation to success with international sojourn, including considering in-country experiences and post-return re-adjustment. An understanding of the changes that participating in exchange programs have on an individual's intercultural effectiveness may assist universities to develop the global management skills and intercultural competencies of graduates.

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